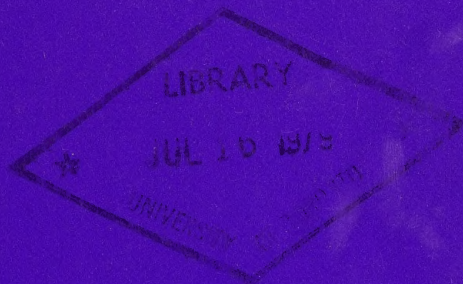



CA1
EA3
-79R06

Music in Canada



REFERENCE
SERIES No. 6



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2022 with funding from
University of Toronto

Music in Canada

Based on a paper written by John Beckwith as an introduction to MUSICANADA: a presentation of Canadian contemporary music, a joint project of the Department of External Affairs and the Canada Council.

Produced by
External Information Programs Division,
Department of External Affairs,
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
K1A 0G2

© Minister of Supply and
Services Canada 1979

Printed by Richelieu Graphics Ltd.

Contract No. 08KT. 08008-78-007

This pamphlet may be freely reproduced
either as a whole or in part. Please note
its date.

Pamphlets in this series may be ob-
tained from all Canadian embassies, high
commissions and consular offices abroad.
Requests for copies of *Reference Series*
by residents of countries where there are
no Canadian representatives should be
addressed to the Domestic Information
Programs Division, Department of
External Affairs, Ottawa K1A 0G2.

Canadian musical history presents a complex pattern because its development has been spasmodic rather than continuous. Canada provides "ethno-musicologists" with one of the richest and most varied fields of research, a fact readily explained by the country's vast distances, the waves of immigration from other continents and cultures, and the consequent slow rate of "acculturation". The areas of study include not only Indian and Inuit (Eskimo) tribal music but the aurally-preserved musical repertoires of many later settler cultures – from French, English, Irish and Scottish to Ukrainian, Czechoslovak, Jewish, Icelandic and Japanese. This music has influenced serious "written-down" music only in characteristically Canadian fits and starts. In 1865 Ernest Gagnon published the first collection of folksongs from French-speaking Canada, in the evident belief that its 100 melodies exhausted the list. When, in the late 1920s, composers such as Ernest MacMillan, Hector Gratton, Claude Champagne and Healey Willan began to take an interest in the corpus of folk music, they were able to draw on tens of thousands of tunes collected in the early decades of the century by Marius Barbeau and others. They made concert settings of the tunes and employed them in "folkloristic" free compositions, perhaps in the conviction that they were putting such na-

tive sounds to creative use for the last time. And, indeed, the composers of the succeeding generation showed little inclination to follow their lead. But surprisingly enough – though again in the familiar spasmodic manner – there has developed since the late 1960s a new enthusiasm for the use of folk material by composers.

In the early Forties, fledgling Canadian composers were fond of saying that they felt as if they were the first generation of Canadians to write music. This was true only in a very special sense. Taking "composition" in its formal European meaning, the main settler cultures provide examples in New Spain from the mid-sixteenth century, in New France from the late seventeenth, and in New England from the early eighteenth. However, instead of a continuous development from such beginnings the musical history of Canada reveals a typical gap between the solitary original composition of the 1680s (by a priest named Martin) and the next works we know of. The musician of the early Canadian cities and towns was a jack-of-all-trades, one of whose talents was the ability to write music as well as teach, play and even sell it. From the late eighteenth century through the early twentieth, most of Canada's musical literature consisted of functional pieces – marches and patriotic songs, quadrilles and waltzes, Protestant psalms, hymns

and evangelical songs, and parlour songs in the sentimental traditions of the successive periods. The more ambitious examples tend to be cantatas and oratorios such as the *Caïn* (1905) of Alexis Contant, or else operettas, from Joseph Quesnel's *Colas et Colinette* (1789) to Oscar Telgmann's *Leo, the Royal Cadet* (1889). A lively sense of the connection between music and everyday life in the late nineteenth century is provided by the cupola-shaped bandstand that dominates the park or public gardens in almost every Canadian community – and by the use of the term “opera house” for its central meeting-hall (only occasionally used for actual operas, though frequently for concerts by such celebrated visitors as Gottschalk, Vieuxtemps and Patti, or for performances by local choral societies).

Against this backdrop, composers of deeper sensitivity such as Calixa Lavallée, Guillaume Couture and Wesley Octavius Forsyth worked somewhat frustratedly, turning to Europe or the United States not only for the maintenance of professional standards but in search of simple recognition. They were in danger of embitterment from contact with what Quesnel had described years before a “L’ingrat canadien” – the culturally-shallow local audience. Lavallée departed for the U.S. (ironically, shortly after composing his most frequently-played piece, now the coun-

try's official anthem, *O Canada*), where he remained until his death. The pattern was repeated by the brilliant young Colin McPhee, who left to take up a U.S. career following the uncomprehending reception of his early piano concerto by a Toronto audience in the 1920s.

Meanwhile the musical climate had changed from the functionalism of earlier times. The twentieth century shows a gradual increase in the cultivation of concert music in Canada, greater institutionalization of musical performance and education, the rise of a Canadian musical industry (recording and broadcasting), accompanied by greater specialization of musical tasks – the appearance of performers who almost exclusively perform and composers who almost exclusively compose.

The performers attracted “world attention” (which meant, generally, the attention of Europe and the U.S.) sooner than the composers. In a largely free-enterprise period, concert tours were extensive and demanded the services of international managers. Emma Albani, Edward Johnson, Eva Gauthier, Raoul Jobin, Kathleen Parlow and Zara Nelsova were among those who achieved celebrity. Others, of a more recent generation, such as Jon Vickers, Huguette Tourangeau and Glenn Gould, followed a similar route to prominence and acclaim but did so in the new climate created by the policies

of the Canada Council, founded as a national cultural agency in 1957, and the various provincial arts councils that sprang up during the succeeding decade or so. In that new climate, Canadians acquired greater power over the shaping of their own culture, and came to appreciate professional standards and tastes more widely than before. The phrase "Canadian content" was much in use, as a result of percentage quotas imposed by the new regulatory body for broadcasting, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission.

As scholarships, prizes and commissions for new music became commoner, composers began to feel that they had a true place in the community. The fact that the Canadian League of Composers (founded in 1951) doubled its membership by 1960 and tripled it again by 1976 provides a measure of the surge of professional activity in the country. More than half its present members are associated with university music departments – the number of such departments having also increased in the past 25 years from about eight to over two dozen. The Canadian Music Centre, established in 1959, ministers to many of the practical needs of composers, and gives widespread publicity to their music.

Electronic music is one new field in the cultivating of which Canadians have played a leading role. As in the

spheres already mentioned, here too the climate offers a shift from sporadic private effort (the acoustic inventions of Hugh LeCaine in the late 1940s, the "musique-concrète" pieces of Serge Garant in the middle 1950s) to more institutionalized, grant-supported activity such as the formation of major research studios attached to university music departments during the late 1950s and early 1960s.

The year 1967 brought many of these developments into sharp focus as Canada celebrated the hundredth anniversary of Confederation. Government agencies, local organizations and independent groups commissioned performances and compositions; the repertory expanded swiftly and impressively, and the country's consciousness of its musical vitality was stimulated afresh.

Two more-recent broad changes are significant. One affects the performance of new music and the other the dissemination of information about composers and their works. In the period following the Second World War, the newly-celebrated soloists and conductors took occasional responsibility for playing while on tour (less often for recording) works by fellow Canadians. Even with the Canada Council's help and encouragement, however, the orchestras and the opera and ballet companies were reluctant to hazard the performance of new works of any

size and seriousness, and were, indeed, often ill-prepared to cope with their special demands even when they did make the attempt. Successes such as Harry Somers's *Louis Riel* (for the Canadian Opera Company) and R. Murray Schafer's *Son of Heldenleben* (for the Montreal Symphony Orchestra) were outstanding exceptions. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, new directions opened up with the formation of young Canadian ensembles that were generally receptive to new idioms (the Orford String Quartet, York Winds, Canadian Brass) and, even more notably, concert groups specializing in the most recent music (Société de Musique Contemporaine du Québec, New Music Concerts, Nova Music). This change helps determine not only how the newest Canadian works are presented but also what they sound like.

The other change has been gradual. Writing about music is not unknown in Canada. But, as with so many other processes, its development has been sporadic. A checklist of some 60 English-language journals on music produced in the country over the past century reveals some surprisingly sophisticated examples, with an average "life-span" of four or five years. Recent relatively stable and serious magazines are the *Canadian Music Journal*, its successor *Canada Music Book* and the *Journal of the Canadian Association*

of University Schools of Music, all of which have in the past 20 years devoted substantial critical articles to works by individual Canadian composers. Book-length studies have appeared on Lavallée and Somers. Histories such as Helmut Kallmann's *A History of Music in Canada 1534-1914* (1960) and surveys such as Arnold Walter's *Aspects of Music in Canada* (1969) have dealt in part with compositional backgrounds and trends. In 1975 the Canadian Music Centre prepared and published *Contemporary Canadian Composers*, a dictionary of the most prominent professional composers of Canada in this century. Finally, an ambitious work entitled *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada* is at an advanced stage of editing and is to appear in 1979 – a one-volume treatment (in both English and French) of all aspects of the subject, giving prominence to the music of Canada's own composers.

What is this music like? Keith MacMillan, until recently general manager of the Canadian Music Centre, has noted sound-images recurring in works by a number of prominent composers during the last 15 years or so, among them native bird-calls such as the song of the white-throated sparrow and the eldritch laugh of the loon – and, of course, the locomotive whistle.

Older composers imitated the dominant figures of their generations, striving to become Canadian

equivalents of Vaughan Williams, de Falla or Bartok by their use of local folk-materials, or of Respighi and Sibelius by their evocation of the local landscape. These tendencies are, in fact, illustrated regularly, from Leo Smith's adaptations of West Coast Indian songs in the 1930s to Harry Somers's research on Newfoundland and Nova Scotia songs in the Sixties and Seventies, and from Champagne's *Symphonie gaspésienne* (1945) to the *Boréal* of François Morel (1964).

Themes from Canadian history have inspired many musical works. The martyrdom of the Jesuit missionaries in the seventeenth century was treated by two very different composers – Healey Willan in his setting of the long dramatic poem *Brébeuf and his Brethren* by E.J. Pratt (1930) and R. Murray Schafer in his *Brébeuf* (1959), written for baritone and orchestra round seventeenth-century texts. Schafer's orchestral imagination creates an instrumental pattern based on a sound that is quintessentially Canadian – the cracking of the ice on the rivers and lakes during the spring thaw, the season of Father Brébeuf's long voyage on foot from Quebec to the Huronia mission. The positive public response to Somers's opera *Louis Riel* (1967) is partly accounted for by the appeal of a gripping political subject (the story of a visionary hanged as a traitor in the 1880s but largely exo-

nerated by recent research), a subject, moreover, extraordinarily well suited to operatic treatment. Satirical comment on the Canadian social scene – which eventually takes on historical character as it shows us how we behaved once – is a characteristic of such stage works of Gabriel Charpentier as *An English Lesson*.

Music also has strong affinities with Canadian literature and art. Serge Garant has set Eskimo folk-poems and Bruce Mather has created a series of works based on poems by Saint-Denys Garneau. Barbara Pentland has collaborated with Dorothy Livesay; Norma Beecroft has taken Leonard Cohen's works as texts. Similarly, the paintings of Lauren Harris and Emily Carr have evoked neo-impressionist responses from Harry Freedman, Morel's *L'Etoile noire* is a vivid orchestral reminder of the canvas of that name by Paul-Emile Borduas in the Montreal Fine Arts Museum and Derek Healey's *Arctic Images* were inspired by a series of prints by Eskimo artists.

Many works – perhaps most of those in the repertory – are essentially abstract, and free from attachment to local environment or culture. Among these some archetypal ways of writing have now and then emerged. Two examples are the quirky, off-centre and spare-textured

staccato jabs of John Weinzwieg's music of the 1950s (to which one finds responses by a number of other Toronto composers of that period, especially Somers and Freeman and late echoes even in Weinzwieg's own works of the 1970s) and the energetic perpetual-motion machinery of a number of fast movements by Jean Papineau-Couture, Clermont Pépin, Pierre Mercure, Jacques Héту and others in the Montreal group during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Thus within our musical literature certain defining "aural thumbprints" can occasionally be detected that owe nothing to overt folk, historical or cultural borrowings. Perspective and study may well reveal more of these – for example, among the soft, mystical percussion works of Gilles Tremblay, Robert Aitken and others.

Two musical signposts of the 1970s appear in a large multi-media composition of Istvan Anhalt and an experiment made under Schafer's leadership. Anhalt's *La Tourangelle*, for prepared tapes, voices and instruments, is a quasi-documentary retelling of the inner struggles of Marie de l'Incarnation, the nun from Tours who became the founder of the Ursuline mission in mid-seventeenth century Quebec. The composer, himself a new Canadian, uses such a variety of sound resources as might perhaps only be brought together in modern Montreal. The

work's historical connections are both musical and strongly emotional. Schafer's "essay in sound", part of a documentary called *Vancouver Soundscape*, consists of a short tone-poem created from the juxtaposition of pretaped sounds of train and ship whistles, foghorns and other signals evocative of the Vancouver harbour area. Creatively slight, this sound collage well illustrates Schafer's feelings regarding the need for aural sensitivity to the environment and, by its range of responses (here haunting, there mockingly ironic), shows a "particularity" in the sounds – that is, some of them belong to Vancouver exclusively, and could be (Schafer is evidently saying) images for musical development.

But other new directions are more general – the attractions of mystic and religious themes that emerge in Tremblay, Schafer and Clifford Ford and the rather austere trend towards diatonicism in John Hawkins's newer pieces. These may eventually prove to be the Canadian archetypes of the late 1970s.



External Affairs
Canada

Affaires extérieures
Canada

3 1761 11553195 6

